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Issue 7.1 (Spring 2018) — Marxism and Cultural Studies

Editors' Introduction: Marxism and Cultural Studies

Stefanie A Jones, Eero Laine and Chris Alen Sula

ABSTRACT Cultural studies as a discipline and intellectual practice is deeply indebted to Marx, even as the field of cultural studies has contested, revisited, and updated Marx's work. This issue points to a number of resonant threads currently active under the umbrella of cultural studies and opens possibilities for historical mapping of the many and varied aspects of marxist thought, in and out of the academy. The authors in this issue direct us toward and augment our understanding of the multi-faceted and inextricable links between questions of capital and questions of race, class, and gender power that have been the focus of US research in cultural studies especially within the past thirty years. In this issue, we continue and expand our editorial emphasis on the role of cultural studies in explaining and challenging the ongoing, intersectional significance of material power relations.

Cultural studies as a discipline and intellectual practice is deeply indebted to Marx, even as the field of cultural studies has contested, revisited, and updated Marx's work. The relationship between Marx, marxism, marxist thought, and cultural studies is richly defined through decades of scholarship, such that, though the discipline did not exist when Marx was writing, it is difficult to imagine cultural studies without Marx. Given how intertwined cultural studies is with Marx more than 150 years after the publication of *Das Kapital*, what shape does marxist cultural studies scholarship take today? This issue points to a number of resonant threads currently active under the umbrella of cultural studies and opens possibilities for historical mapping of the many and varied aspects of marxist thought, in and out of the academy.

This issue, as the CFP for it imagined, points to vital threads for further engagement. Black Marxism, Marxist Feminism, Transnational Marxisms, and transnational Marxist movements, (all intersectionally-conceived), are vibrant arenas of thought in their own right which cultural studies sidelines at its own peril. While Marx has been central to the academic discipline (such as it is) of cultural studies, this field moves through and beyond Marx's engagement with the world, dialectically expanding on and with Marx's work. The authors in this issue direct us toward and augment our understanding of the multi-faceted and inextricable links between questions of capital and questions of race, class, and gender power that have been the focus of US research in cultural studies especially within the past thirty years. In this issue, we continue and expand our editorial emphasis on the role of cultural studies in explaining and challenging the ongoing, intersectional significance of material power relations.

A special issue on a topic as large as Marx and cultural studies will necessarily be incomplete. Such a collection can only capture pieces of the deluge of intellectual and political work on and with Marx that has played such a key role in understanding and changing our relations with capital, capitalism, and capitalists. As Marx's work is often either sanctified or vilified, the task of responding to such a vision—Marx and cultural studies—is a daunting one. The authors in this issue have thus valiantly put forward varied

and at times contesting notions of how Marx might be deployed, engaged, and questioned within a cultural studies framework. This special issue, then, points to future directions that cultural studies (and by extension, *Lateral*) might continue to engage. Alongside and informed by the work of these contributors, this special issue marks a call for further inquiry, deeper engagement, and expanded research. [We welcome contributions continuing this project.](#)

Our lead article, Leigh Claire La Berge's "[Decommodified Labor: Conceptualizing Work after the Wage.](#)" reconsiders immaterial labor and waged work in light of a number of contemporary trends in commerce and the workforce. The article questions some of the historical and critical assumptions about the ways that labor is defined and redefined. In taking this up, La Berge's article offers us new ways of thinking through the unwaged labor that increasingly occupies our time and efforts.

Working in parallel to wages, Liane Tanguay presents a cogent critique of debt in "[Imagined Immunities: Abjection, Contagion and the Neoliberal Debt Economy.](#)" The article neatly overlaps Marxian economics, social theories of debt, and medical discourses of immunity and contagion in its consideration of neoliberal capital. Such discourse is deployed through examples of biohorror in contemporary media as well as the affective and actual crises that permeate contemporary life.

John McMahon engages Marx through an affective lens in "[Vital Forces: Marx and the Tension of Capitalist Affect.](#)" His article examines the historical precedent for such an approach with a novel reading of Marx with and against Spinoza and Deleuze. The work offers an important critique of capitalist affect and asks what affective responses might be available for communal purposes while returning to Marx's central work.

In "[Marxism, Cultural Studies, and the 'Principle of Historical Specification': On the Form of Historical Time in Conjunctural Analysis.](#)" Douglas Spielman engages the field of cultural studies and its historiographic assumptions. The article reconsiders the notion of conjuncture as a way of moving past linear and progressive notions of time. Engaging Marx, Althusser, Grossberg, and others, Spielman argues for multiplicities of time that open, rather, than foreclose, cultural analysis.

Heath Schultz's article, "[Debord in Watts: Race and Class Antagonisms Under Spectacle.](#)" works historically and theoretically—returning to the Watts uprising in 1965 and the insights of Afropessimism to illuminate and move beyond Guy Debord's race and class politics in *Society of the Spectacle*. Schultz discusses how the spectacle requires blackness to represent poverty as well as to be policed into poverty; through this Schultz elucidates Debord's understanding of the Watts rebels as revolutionary subjects, struggling to counter the alienation of life under spectacle. Working with Afropessimist thinkers to demonstrate the limits of Debord's politics around capitalism's foundational antiblackness, Schultz returns us to the riot as a means of breaking out of the spectacle's dependence on communication and on our very selves.

Taking on the persistent matter of Marx and rights, Martin Moorby revisits key texts by Marx and Steven Lukes in his article, "[\[W\]ho is this man who is distinct from this citizen? Revisiting Marx's Critique of Liberal Rights.](#)" Moorby provides us with a spirited review of the arguments surrounding Marx and liberal rights, while arguing, via Marx, for a nuanced understanding of rights that stems from careful historicization.

Also in this issue is "[The Best of All Possible Ends of the World: An Interview with Andrew Culp.](#)" Josef Thorne interviews Culp, author of *Dark Deleuze*. Culp begins with an anarchist perspective on the recent history and practice of social movements, and discusses how Deleuze has been used to interject liberalism into Marxism, and engages

with recent scholarship by thinkers including Isabelle Stenger and Manuel DeLanda. The interview also resonates with themes present in Schultz's article; when read together the two pieces point towards Afropessimism's past and future role in thinking questions of capital and cultural studies.

Finally, we are pleased to publish the 2017 winner of the Randy Martin Prize. The prize is awarded each year at the Cultural Studies Association to the graduate student with the best paper presentation. We congratulate Elizabeth Verklan for the article "[Doing What You Love in the Age of Mass Debt](#)," which is published here. Shedding light on the subject of what LaBerge calls "decommodified labor," Verklan dissects the neoliberal notion of doing what one loves through the particular figure of the fashion intern. Often unpaid and working in a field of uncertain value, the fashion intern comes to stand in as an idealized worker in neoliberal markets. Verklan's prize-winning article resonates here amongst the other articles in this issue with its attention to labor and shifting modes of production under late capitalism.

[Bio](#)



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SAJ is a McNair scholar, an organizer, and an educator, and received their doctorate from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. SAJ has published in edited collections and *Theatre Journal* and has taught at Brooklyn College, Hunter College, the College of Staten Island, Marymount Manhattan College, and New York University. SAJ's research explores war, white supremacy, twenty-first century capitalist economies, and the connections between class formation and political practice.

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